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MARK TWAIN AND PAUL BOURGET.

BY MAX O'RELL.

WHEN I came to the United States for the first time, some eight years ago, an eminent American said to me : " My dear friend, I have no doubt that, on returning home, you will write a book on America and the Americans. Now, let me give you a warning. When you have been six months with us you will believe, honestly believe, that you have enough material for such a book ; but if you stay six years you will come to the conclusion that the attempt is beyond your power."

I said nothing ; but I confess that I thought to myself : " I am all right—I am going to be here six months only."

A man of average intelligence, who has passed six months among a people, cannot, it is true, express opinions that are worth jotting down, but he can form impressions that are worth repeating. For my part, I think that foreigners' impressions are more interesting than native opinions. After all, such impressions merely mean " how the country *struck* the foreigner." If I met an American who had spent a week in Paris, I should probably feel inclined to ask him *à l'Américaine*, what he thinks of that city. If he had lived there twenty years it would not enter my mind to ask him the question, because he would have *opinions* and not impressions, and his opinions would be of no interest to me. I once read a most fascinating little book on Denmark, by Charles Joliet, entitled *A Week in Denmark*. The book is kindly, good-humored, and of unflagging verve. It has no depth. Why, of course not. *A Week in Denmark*, that is an honest title, if you like ! I pick out of the book the following impression : " The Danish women bear the French colors : red lips, white complexion, and blue eyes." This is the

kind of impression I like, something superficial, light, sympathetic, good-humored, and kindly.

When I published *Jonathan and His Continent*, I wrote on a preface addressed to Jonathan: "If ever you should insist in seeing in this little volume a serious study of your country and of your countrymen, I warn you that your world-wide fame for humor will be exploded."

A book, written by a man who has spent six months in a country, on that country and its people, whether by one of the brightest ornaments of modern literature like M. Paul Bourget, or by a professional humorist like Mark Twain, is a joke. M. Paul Bourget has attempted a serious book, a book of opinions, which makes the joke perfectly huge, and Mark Twain does not like it. Now Mark Twain, as a professional humorist, does not appreciate other people's jokes. Professional humorists never do. But I believe that in this case it is M. Paul Bourget who is the humorist and Mark Twain the dull man.

Mark Twain himself writes of foreign countries in a true, genial spirit. He once struck the real impressionist note when he wrote of France, and exclaimed, on entering the bedroom of his hotel and seeing no soap on the washstand: "What, waiter, no soap! Don't you know that soap is indispensable to an American, and that only a Frenchman can do without it!" The non-humorous Frenchman would reply to Mark Twain: "My dear sir, we French people are a peculiar sort of people. We carry our own soap in our trunks when we travel, and would have as much objection to using that soap as to using an old stray toothbrush we might find on the same piece of furniture." And, as I said in an article published in the November (1894) number of *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, nations are not better or worse than others—they are different." For example, some like soap second-hand; some do not. *Voilà*.

I am not aware that a book on France and the French, written by a foreigner, flattering or otherwise, ever was a success, or read, or even heard of in France. We do not in the least concern ourselves about what people think or say of us. If we did, as the Anglo-Saxons do, we would study how to hide our faults instead of boasting of them. We would do as the Anglo-Saxons—we would boast of our virtues, especially those which we have not got. We would be Pharisees, instead of being Publicans, ever

ready to confess our shortcomings with a gay candor, which, by the way, ought to disarm unkind criticism. Like the Americans, if ever we became fond of criticism of ourselves, we should like compliments that offer us flattery, and criticism that gives us offence. So far, we care for neither. We are satisfied to know that all the foreigners of the world are concerned about us. We are a modest nation.

Mark Twain has given to the Anglo-Saxon world what M. Paul Bourget has given to the French, the impressions of his travels. He, too, is "an Observer of peoples, a Classifier, a Grouper, a Deducer, a Generalizer, a Psychologizer," though, perhaps, not a Thinker. Mark Twain not a Deducer! What about the soap story just mentioned? Why, he is a Prince of Deducers! a Prince of Generalizers! but, withal, a humorist, a genial, good-humored writer, and, on that account, I thought, incapable of writing such an article as appeared in the January number of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.

Mark Twain does not like M. Paul Bourget's articles on America. To tell the truth, I do not either. Mark Twain, however, only read the English translation of *Outre-Mer* that appeared in a leading New York paper. The translation is clumsy, and gives no idea of the original. I had this advantage over Mark Twain that I read *Outre-Mer* in French, and I found the sauce almost good enough to make me enjoy the fish. The style of M. Paul Bourget is so beautiful that I can read his books, forgetting the matter for the manner, just as I would listen to Adelina Patti singing scales.

So, I repeat, Mark Twain does not like M. Paul Bourget's book. So long as he makes light fun of the great French writer, he is at home, he is pleasant, he is the American humorist we know. When he takes his revenge (and where is the reason for taking a revenge?) he is unkind, unfair, bitter, nasty.

For example:

See his answer to a Frenchman who jokingly remarks to him:

"I suppose life can never get entirely dull to an American, because whenever he can't strike up any other way to put in his time, he can always get away with a few years trying to find who his grandfather was."

Hear the answer:

"I reckon a Frenchman's got *his* little standby for a dull time too; be-

cause when all other interests fail, he can turn in and see if he can't find out who his father was."

The first remark is a good-humored bit of chaffing on American snobbery. I may be utterly destitute of humor, but I call the second remark a gratuitous charge of immorality hurled at the Frenchwomen, a remark unworthy of a man who has the ear of the public, a gross insult to a nation friendly to America, a nation that helped Mark Twain's ancestors in their struggle for liberty, a nation where to-day it is enough to say that you are American to see every door open wide to you.

If Mark Twain was hard in search of a French "chestnut," I might have told him the following little anecdote. It is more funny than his and would have been less insulting. Two little street boys are abusing each other. "Ah, hold your tongue," says one, "you ain't got no father." "Ain't got no father!" replies the other; "I've got more fathers than you."

Elsewhere Mark Twain wonders what France could teach America. I may, by and by, enlighten him a little on the subject. "Novel writing?" he exclaims. "No, M. Bourget and *the others* [the italics are mine] know only one plan, and when that is expurgated there is nothing left of the book."

Now, the style of M. Paul Bourget and many other French writers is apparently a closed letter to Mark Twain; but let us leave that alone. Has he read Erckmann Chatrian, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Edmond About, Cherbuliez, Renan? Has he read Gustave Droz's *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé*, and those books which leave for a long time a perfume about you? Has he read the novels of Alexander Dumas, Eugène Sue, George Sand, and Balzac? Has he read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and *Notre Dame de Paris*? Has he read or heard the plays of Sandeau, Augier, Dumas, and Sardou, the works of those Titans of modern literature, whose names will be household words all over the world for hundreds of years to come? He has read *La Terre*—this kind-hearted, refined humorist! When Mark Twain visits a garden, does he smell the violets, the roses, the jasmine, or the honeysuckle? No, he goes in the far-away corner where the soil is prepared. Hear what he says: "I wish M. Paul Bourget had read more of our novels before he came. It is the only way to thoroughly understand a people. When I found I was coming to Paris I read *La Terre*." Fancy my saying: "When I found I

was coming to America, I read Mr. W. T. Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago*." And *La Terre* is a work of fiction; the other is based on facts, and is written by a man who may be called a faddist, but whose sincerity and honesty nobody doubts.

So, Mark Twain read *La Terre*. Who is the Anglo-Saxon who has not read that book which has had such a phenomenal success in Great Britain and America, but has been such a ghastly failure in France? To Mark Twain's guide in Paris the Louvre was the *Grands Magasins*, not the museum; to Mark Twain, French literature is *La Terre*. If it was so to some low drummer, *passe encore*; but to a leading light of modern American literature, pshaw!

"What would France teach us?" he exclaims again. "Morals? No, we cannot rob the poor to enrich ourselves." Now, shall I tell Mark Twain that the proportion of illegitimate children to legitimate ones is nine per cent. in Paris, twelve per cent. in New York, fifteen per cent. in Chicago, and more than that in San Francisco? Oh, I don't like to mention those things, but if Mark Twain wants them, here they are; and the French have an excuse for *liaisons* that does not exist in America, where marrying and un-marrying are made so easy that really it cannot be worth anybody's while to do without it.

There are so many pleasant reminiscences you can keep of countries you have known, if only you have visited their best places, frequented their best people, and read their best books.

For one thing, at least, I am grateful to know that I have not lost the respect of the people whom I have criticised in my books or in my lectures, and I feel satisfied that I have not to apologize to any nation for what I have written about her people.

What good could be obtained by informing the French that there is more low, repulsive, unheard-of vice in a square block of Chicago and San Francisco than in a square mile of Paris! It would wound the feelings of the Americans without making the French happy, and the Americans would feel it all the more that they, including Mark Twain, know it to be true. No, no, the "Observer of Peoples" has a better mission than that, especially if, like Mark Twain, he has had the good fortune to obtain popularity in the book market as well as on the platform. He should strain every nerve to smooth away difficulties; he should never utter a phrase that could give offence to any nation. And if he

has at his disposal that most formidable weapon, humor, he should use it to laugh away international prejudices.

“What could France teach America?” exclaims Mark Twain. France can teach America all the higher pursuits of life, and there is more artistic feeling and refinement in a street of French workingmen than in many avenues inhabited by American millionaires. She can teach her, not perhaps how to work, but how to rest, how to live, how to be happy. She can teach her that the aim of life is not money-making, but that money-making is only a means to obtain an end. She can teach her that wives are not expensive toys, but useful partners, friends, and confidants, who should always keep men under their wholesome influence by their diplomacy, their tact, their common-sense, without bumptiousness. These qualities, added to the highest standard of morality (not angular and morose, but cheerful morality), are conceded to Frenchwomen by whoever knows something of French life outside of the Paris boulevards, and Mark Twain’s ill-natured sneer cannot even so much as stain them.

In France a man who was seen tipsy in his club would immediately see his name cancelled from membership. A man who had settled his fortune on his wife to avoid meeting his creditors would be refused admission into any decent society. Many a Frenchman has blown his brains out rather than declare himself a bankrupt. Now would Mark Twain reply to this: “An American is not such a fool; when a creditor stands in his way he closes his doors, and reopens them the following day. When he has been a bankrupt three times he can retire from business”? Oh, but I hate saying such things as these. I have seen so many beautiful sides to the American character, I have met such kind people, I have made such lovely friends in America, that I could not forgive myself for uttering one phrase that would give offence to the people of this great country. I am sure these American friends, warm-hearted friends of mine, will feel for me, and forgive me any little bitterness that may transpire through these lines.

International criticism is slippery ground to walk upon, and it is as risky to venture compliments as it is to utter criticisms. Once I said to an American reporter that, Frenchman as I was, I was ready to acknowledge the superiority of American coffee.

“Not even in France,” I said, “can I get such a good cup of coffee as I get here.” The next morning I read an interview thus headed: “Max O’Rell Is a Humbug; He Wants Our Dollars.” Then I thought I would try what I could do with tea. Next time a reporter called I said to him: “Now, will you tell me how it is that in this country you can’t get a cup of tea fit to drink?” The next morning I read an interview headed: “Max O’Rell Is Grumbling.” I had insulted America. Well, from that I derived a good lesson. “In future,” I said to myself, “when I speak of coffee, I won’t pile it on; when I speak of tea, I will draw it mild.”

When M. Paul Bourget indulges in a little chaffing at the expense of the Americans, “who can always get away with a few years trying to find out who their grandfathers were,” he merely makes an illusion to an American foible; but, forsooth, what a kind man, what a humorist Mark Twain is when he retorts by calling France a nation of bastards! How the Americans of culture and refinement will admire him for thus speaking in their name!

Snobbery is not an American foible; it is an Anglo-Saxon one, not necessarily to be found among the younger branches. Old England reeks with it. The English know it. Thackeray knew it. He wrote a whole book to describe all the specimens of English snobs. The society papers of England know it, expose it—and live by it.

I could give Mark Twain an example of the American specimen. It is a piquant story. I never published it because I feared my readers might think that I was giving them a typical illustration of American character instead of a rare exception.

I was once booked by my manager to give a *causerie* in the drawing-room of a New York millionaire. I accepted with reluctance. I do not like private engagements. At five o’clock on the day the *causerie* was to be given, the lady sent a note to my manager to say that she would expect me to arrive at nine o’clock and then to speak for about an hour. Then she wrote a post-script. Many women are unfortunate there. Their minds are full of after-thoughts, and the most important part of their letters is generally to be found after their signature. This lady’s P. S. ran thus: “I suppose he will not expect to be entertained after the lecture.”

I fairly shouted, as Mark Twain would say, and then, indulging myself in a bit of snobbishness, I was back at her as a flash—

“Dear Madam : As a literary man of some reputation, I have many times had the pleasure of being entertained by the members of the old aristocracy of France. I have also many times had the pleasure of being entertained by the members of the old aristocracy of England. If it may interest you, I can even tell you that I have several times had the honor of being entertained by royalty ; but my ambition has never been so wild as to expect that one day I might be entertained by the aristocracy of New York. No, I do not expect to be entertained by you, nor do I want you to expect me to entertain you and your friends to-night, for I decline to keep the engagement.”

Now, I could fill a book on America with reminiscences of this sort, adding a few chapters on bosses and boodlers, on New York *chronique scandaleuse*, on the tenement-houses of the large cities, on the gambling-hells of Denver, and the dens of San Francisco, and what not ! But I will not do it, Mark. I have found, throughout the length and breadth of America, people who respect France and entertain for her nothing but feelings of affection. Mark Twain's article will offend them quite as much as it offends me, and I have seen already many letters in the American papers loudly protesting against it.

Even if *Outre-Mer* were an abuse of America, the *tu quoque* argument is no answer to it. Mark Twain quotes nothing from the book. He innocently confesses that he reads *La Terre*. If that is all he knows of our modern literature, I may take it that he knows of French life only what was shown him on the Paris boulevards by the guide he had engaged.

I feel ill at ease having to write in English, which is not my tongue. I earnestly wish the editor of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW would have allowed me to answer in French. Then I might, perhaps, have written a reply worthy of the circumstance. I have written it, however, “more in sorrow than in anger.” I can honestly say that.

M. Paul Bourget's book is pretentious in its aim, and provincial in its execution. In the French original it is like anything M. Paul Bourget writes—a masterpiece of composition and style, and no translation of such a book can do it justice ; it is no more

translatable into English than the works of Victor Hugo, or than the works of Shakespeare can be into French.

M. Bourget's analysis of character is so subtle that his dissected subject is reduced to threads that often are hardly tangible. On that account the book will pass over the heads of many Americans, and will not be "thoughtfully and profitably studied" by them. It has passed over Mark Twain's head. *Outre-Mer*, however, is the work of a great man of letters, and of a gentleman. If the book will not teach much to the French, or anything to the Americans, it ought to have achieved at least one object—Mark Twain might certainly have derived from its perusal a lesson in politeness and good manners.

MAX O'RELL.